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Collector's Dream

·TIM CONRAD INTERVIEW · WARDWORLD·

· GRADING COMIC BOOKS · MONEY ·

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COLLECTOR'S DREAM MAGAZINE

Fandom today *needs* a quality, low-cost publication which is totally devoted to the world of comic books. Look around, and you will find only a small handful of magazines which reach even a thousand comic fans. None of these could be considered to be a general circulation magazine. Since there are over 50,000 comic fans (at least, judging by the number of copies of the *Comic Book Price Guide* which are sold each year), even the highest-circulation fan publication reaches only one in five interested people.

We at G&T Enterprises feel that almost everybody will find something of interest in COLLECTOR'S DREAM, if you are at all interested in comics. Our features this issue include the first editorial on MONEY by comics fan and indexer George Olshevsky; an article by George on a new comic book grading system; an interview with Tim Conrad conducted by George; and the first installment of WARDWORLD, a regular column by Murray Ward of Winnipeg.

Frankly, George can't continue writing articles for COLLECTOR'S DREAM forever. WE NEED ARTICLES LIKE CRAZY, and we will pay for them. All of you people out there who have anything to say, who feel inspired to write about any facet of comic book reading or collecting, who want to share your experiences at a comic book convention, who want to talk about the good old days, or whatever, WRITE IT UP AND SEND IT TO US. (Please type on one side, 8½" x 11", double-spaced!) If we feel it is a good article, we will publish it and send you a cheque. NO KIDDING. TRY US! And if you hate the thought of accepting money for your work, we will SEND IT TO YOUR FAVORITE CHARITY.

VOL.1 NO.1

COLLECTOR'S DREAM MAGAZINE

"Finding a need and filling it."

G&T Enterprises
PUBLISHER

George Olshevsky
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Tony Frutti
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

George Olshevsky
Tony Frutti
ART DIRECTORS

Tony Frutti
PRODUCTION

Tony Frutti
LAYOUTS

George Olshevsky
Tony Frutti
ADVERTISING / SALES

Murray Ward
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Tony Frutti
SUBSCRIPTIONS

Dean Motter
FRONT COVER LOGO

Franc Reyes
INTERIOR LOGOS

Barre Graphics
TYPOGRAPHY

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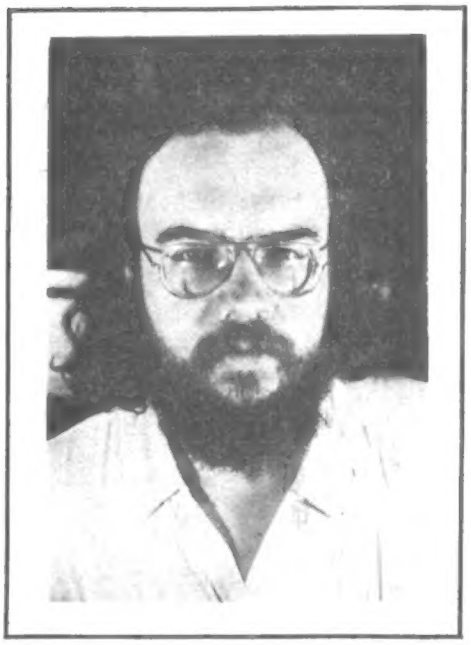
Editorial

GEORGE OLSHEVSKY



money; the real collector's dream

BY George Olshevsky

Money. That's the *real* Collector's Dream, isn't it?

The issue of money looms large in the minds of fans, and terms like "profit", "greed", and "ripoff" have added a particular distaste to any kind of rational and realistic discussion fans might undertake concerning money. Distaste or no, unless you're one of the very few people to whom money is no object, sooner or later you will reach the point where you will have to pass up purchasing a book for your collection or pass up doing a fan project because the money you need will be unavailable. There is no trick to building up a vast comic book collection or publishing a high-quality fan magazine if you have the cash. The trick is to do it when you *don't*.

It behooves fans everywhere to come to grips with the very important financial aspects of our hobby, to try to understand the reasons behind today's soaring comic book price inflation, to examine the ethics of making money on fan projects, to consider ways and means of generating funds for their collections, and so forth. Above all, the financial situation is not helped by fans running around with their hands thrown up in the air and screaming, "Ripoff, ripoff!" whenever the new *Price Guide* comes out or whenever a dealer tries to overcharge for a desirable comic book.

This editorial is the first in a series of editorials I will write for *Collector's Dream* concerning money and the commercial end of our hobby. Let me title this installment

THE WELLSPRINGS OF COMIC BOOK INFLATION

Nine years ago, when I started collecting comic books in earnest rather than just by reading them and giving them away, *Fantastic Four* No. 1 was selling for about $7.00 per copy, while *Action Comics* No. 1, then the highest-priced book, was selling for about $250. I say "about" because there was at the time no uniform *Comic Book Price Guide* and there was a large variation in prices between comic dealers in different cities. A careful search of small used book dealers might have turned up copies of *Fantastic Four* No. 1 selling for as little as 5 cents apiece.

This year I have seen asking prices for *Fantastic Four* No. 1 as high as $750 for perfect mint copies, while equivalent copies of *Action Comics* No. 1 stand at $4500. The current highest-priced comic, *Marvel Comics* No. 1, has sold for as much as $7500 in about fine condition. There is clear and obvious evidence that the comic book market has undergone a *massive* inflation. Although I have indicated the most extreme cases above, the inflation in comic book prices has affected virtually every single comic book on the collector's market to some—usually great—extent. So massive and so sudden is this inflation that it strongly threatens to stifle comic fandom entirely by undermining the trade in back issues so vital to the hobby.

Many factors have been implicated as causes of comic book inflation. Here is a comprehensive list, in no particular order:

(1) Greed.
(2) A vastly increased demand for back issues.
(3) The existence of collectors with unlimited funds.
(4) Arbitrary price-fixing and price manipulation.
(5) Speculation.
(6) Synergism.

This editorial will review the mechanisms by which the above-named causes are supposed to augment inflation, and comment on their probable effectiveness. I will avoid making value judgements and moralizing, and will leave it to the reader to form his own opinions along those lines if he cares to.

(1) GREED

Western civilization and society are primarily motivated by money, as was pointed out so long ago by Adam Smith and by cadres of economists ever since. Money is the carrot we wave in front of people in order to compel them to perform services for us. The more money we have, the more and better services we can obtain. The desire on the part of the person offering his services to be able to purchase services for himself is called the *profit motive*.

There are other ways to motivate people. One could, for example, hold a gun to another's head. Or one could indoctrinate a person with the desire to perform the service. (That these two methods actually work and produce viable societies is indicated by the example of the countries behind the Iron Curtain.) But in the last analysis, the motivating force which compels a person to perform services which he would not

[continued on page 6]

Collector's-eye-view of the typical comic book dealer?!

otherwise be interested in doing is either a real or implied threat to his lifestyle. Thus, I work in computers because the salary is high enough to keep me happily in comic books, food and whatnot, and because I am able to perform the necessary services. Make no mistake: I would *much rather* produce comic book indexes and magazines like *Collector's Dream*, but at the moment I would be unable to continue living on the proceeds from those ventures in the same manner as I do while doing computer work. (Perhaps soon—)

Comic book dealers perform a service for fandom. At the very least they provide a storefront or a dealership within which back issue comics may be bought and sold, and through which fans may sell their publications to other fans. I cannot imagine going through thousands of attics and old houses and placing want ads in newspapers to locate comic books for my collection. Nor would I want to work in the dark when it comes time (if ever) to sell my collection. I have no desire to become a full-time dealer.

A dealer provides a location where the general public can dispose of their accumulations of back issue comics and a clearing house where the collector can purchase books for his collection. If there is to be such a thing as comic book collecting and comic fandom, then I believe that dealers have a *crucial* role to play. Fandom could *not* have gotten where it is today without the support of its dealers.

Since comic book dealers perform a service, they should be paid for it. This is obvious, given our social structure and our way of life. What is less obvious is *just how much*. When all is said and done, *this is something only the customer decides*. If a dealer sets a price of $20.00 on a book which a collector desires for his collection, it is the collector himself who ultimately determines whether the book is properly priced. This is a personal decision made solely by the customer, using whatever private criteria he has; nobody is twisting his arm to buy a book for his collection. The collector has the options of making a counteroffer, paying the asking price, or rejecting the book, all at his own discretion. The dealer has set the price of the book by balancing his greed against whatever obligations he feels towards the collector and what he thinks he can get for the book; but he has no guarantee that anybody will pay his price (although he could very easily try to persuade his customer of that!)

Suppose the above book has a listed *Price Guide* price of $5.00. A collector who wants the book could very well accuse the dealer of being a "ripoff artist". But whom is the dealer ripping off? The collector who willingly parts with his $20.00? *It is neither immoral, nor usury, nor theft, nor a ripoff for a dealer to charge whatever he believes the market will bear* for any book he has for sale. But a collector is a fool to pay a price if he believes he is being overcharged. I cannot condemn any dealer for setting high prices on his books; I can and do condemn collectors for paying high prices for books which they feel are overpriced.

"It is neither immoral, nor usury, nor theft, nor a ripoff for a dealer to charge whatever he believes the market will bear. It is merely good business."

However, I do not consider a collector immoral or a fool to pay high prices *if* he believes the book he is buying is worth the money, even if every other collector in the world calls him an idiot. In the last analysis, the other collectors are only looking after their own interests in trying to keep down the prices of the comics they still need.

Greed on the part of the dealers is not, of itself, a cause of comic book inflation. Rather, it is the *greed for back issues among the collectors* which nourishes the steep rises in comic book prices, and which keeps the dealers in business. Greed, and ignorance of the value both on the market and to themselves of the books they buy.

(2) INCREASED DEMAND FOR BACK ISSUES.

In the years I've been a comic collector, the number of fans participating in this wonderful hobby has grown astonishingly. Now that large numbers of dealers have established themselves and advertise extensively, locating and purchasing back issue comic books by those not fortunate enough to have been able to purchase them on the newsstands has been made very easy. Even the laziest of collectors can build up an extensive accumulation of comic books.

Then, too, comics appeal to a far wider spectrum of readers than ever before, both children and adults. Comic books are no longer viewed as "kid stuff" by the straights, and comic book readers and collectors are no longer regarded as peculiar misfits by the public at large. Perhaps unfortunately, comic books are becoming "fashionable".

This all means that people who once read comics as children are returning to the ranks of fandom, and that kids who start out reading comics are apt to remain comic readers well into their teens if not forever. More and more people with real money to spend are finding enjoyment in reading and collecting comic books.

In contrast to this, the number of available comic books remains either constant or even decreases with time. The ravages of age and mishandling cause some number of comic books to deteriorate to the point where they are no longer suitable for collection.

The combination of the two effects—increases in the number of collectors coupled with a decrease in the available collectable comics—serves to intensify the competition for back issues and raises their price.

(3) COLLECTORS WITH UNLIMITED FUNDS

"If you think that comic book prices are high now," it has been said, "wait until the *rich* people step in!" Coins and stamps, that is, numismatics and philately, are the two widest-spread of all hobbies. It has long been claimed that rare stamps and rare coins are, along with gold and blue-white perfect diamonds, two of the solidest, most secure investments a person could make. When you stop to consider that the top prices being paid for rare coins and stamps are hovering around the $250,000 level, whereas comic books have yet to attain even $10,000, you will realize just how much farther the field can go. Those quarter-million-dollar prices have been *paid*; they are *not* asking prices.

One reason, certainly, that coin and stamp prices have soared is that coins and stamps are attractive to people with large amounts of money to spend. A rich collector gains a tremendous amount of status if he happens to have the only existing copy of a coin or a stamp, and he is willing to pay heavily for the privilege. It is a matter of only a few years before the number of such people in comics fandom undergoes a decisive increase.

Five years ago a collector named Mitchell Mehdy purchased a copy of *Action Comics* No. 1 for just over $1800, at a time when copies were available for as "little" as $400. He paid four times the going rate for that book because he *wanted* it. It was a thrilling book to own, and he didn't care what he paid for it. Today that book could bring at least $3000. Thus, what was regarded as an act of insanity by most fans—and *Esquire* magazine—turned out to be a fairly sound collecting venture.

One major effect of Mehdy's purchase was to focus the eyes of those with money on our hobby, however briefly. Another major effect was to accelerate the comic book price rise, since collectors were given a psychological boost to overspend for their books. For example, even though *Action Comics* No. 1 was at that time selling for only $400, a collector who wanted the book could much more easily justify spending $1000 for the book —$600 over the going price—because "some damn fool" had paid $1800 for it.

(4) ARBITRARY PRICE FIXING AND MANIPULATION

There are now far too many dealers in comics for there to be an active, conscious price-fixing *via* face-to-face discussions between them. The only agency through which comic book prices may be fixed and manipulated is the *Comic Book Price Guide*. Since the *Guide* is compiled from dealers' *for sale* lists, there is nothing to prevent dealers everywhere from heavily overpricing their books, regardless of whether or not they actually *sell* the books at those prices, in an effort to drive up the prices in the next edition of the *Guide*. Since the *Guide* has truly become the Bible of Comic Fandom, this method of price-fixing could indeed be a most effective agent of comic book inflation.

Then again, since every informed dealer generally obtains a copy of the *Price Guide* as soon as possible after publication and immediately brings all his prices into line with, if not actually over, the listed amounts, the average for

sale prices *must always* increase from year to year. This is a mathematical fact of life completely independent of any other kind of price-fixing or manipulation which might be occurring.

Last year five copies of a comic book titled *Motion Picture Funnies Weekly* were revealed to comic collectors, with the information that a copy with six missing pages was sold for $2000. Two complete copies of *Motion Picture Funnies Weekly* were offered for sale at $5000 per copy and were ultimately sold for $4250 and $4500 respectively. The fact that the $2000 copy was sold to the publisher of the *Price Guide* itself could certainly be used to substantiate the claim that the comic book market was being manipulated. No justification for any of those price tags was provided.

A rather different kind of price-fixing stems from the notion that "the older a comic is, the more valuable it is". Marvel and DC comics from five or six years ago are quite as plentiful and no more in demand than comics a few months old. Nevertheless, as an example, the *Price Guide* lists *Amazing Spider-Man* No. 88 as being worth twice as much as *Amazing Spider-Man* No. 153. I certainly have seen both comics offered for sale equally often, and there seems to be no *a priori* reason why the older book should be worth more than the younger book.

If anything, since comic sales are known to have *decreased* somewhat during the period between the years those two books were published, one might expect that the younger book would be in somewhat shorter supply than the older book.

Still another kind of price-fixing occurs when a collector who needs only a few books to complete his runs or his collection pays a vastly inflated sum for his remaining wants "just to get them out of the way". This is certainly, to the collector, a valid reason for overpaying; but when word of the exaggerated sale price reaches other dealers, they frequently raise their prices to match. There seems to be no reason why fans in general should be subjected to high prices because particular fans are desperate to fill out their collections.

Arbitrary price-fixing is that particular kind of price-fixing for which there is, or seems to be, no substantial reason. There is no reason why the "older / more valuable" rule should apply to comic books, particularly with respect to the more recent issues. There is no reason for dealers to raise their prices on a yearly basis when the books are not selling at their old prices. There is no reason for dealers to peg their books at the highest price they have heard of somebody paying. Yet these kinds of price-fixing occur often enough and are pervasive enough that they are a substantial force behind comic book inflation.

I can only suggest to dealers that profits increase mainly with increased turnover, and that it is better both for dealers and collectors if the book business *keeps moving*. It is better in the long run to sell a book at a lower profit margin than to leave it on the shelf hoping for a big spender, because the proceeds can be converted into stock to further increase profits.

"It is the greed for back issues among the collectors which nourishes the steep rises in comic book prices."

As a final note, it should be mentioned that coin and stamp dealers across the country are connected by a special wire service which carries the very latest buy / sell prices. This is price-fixing on a grand scale, and comics fandom is not yet ready for an operation of this magnitude. But it does illustrate how far the field could progress in the future.

(5) SPECULATION.

Speculation is the purchasing of large lots of comics in order to decrease the available supply and thereby justify a higher asking price. The usual recourse of the collector, namely, to carry on business elsewhere, is taken from him because there is no "elsewhere". A prime example of speculative price manipulation concerns the appearance of the first issue of *Howard the Duck*.

Dealers anticipated a heavy demand for *Howard the Duck* No. 1, and in some cases purchased the entire distributors' allotment of the comic for a whole city. Since as a result the book did not appear on the newsstands, potential customers were forced to obtain their copies from the speculators, who charged as much as $3.00 for the 25 cent comic book. Currently, prices over $10.00 per copy are being charged.

Speculation can backfire. The anticipated demand for copies of *Shazam* No. 1, which underwent a similar speculative buying surge three years ago, failed to materialize. The comic book market is now flooded with copies of *Shazam* No. 1 which can often be purchased for less than the original cover price.

Although speculation can in certain circumstances be a dramatic agent of comic book inflation, it can just as easily serve as an agent of comic book *de*flation. Since only a few books are good speculation material, I find speculation, on the whole, to be only as incidental influence on the global comic book inflation.

A variant of the speculation mechanism occurs when a dealer or collector manages to locate a windfall lot of scarce back issues. It is in his best interest never to reveal his find, but to conserve his books, selling them off slowly so as not to flood the market and lower the price. Recent examples of this include the finding of several hundred copies of the 1950's *Sub-Mariner* No. 34 and *Human Torch* No. 37 in unused condition, and the finding of a well-stocked warehouse of back issue Warren magazines.

Careful management of windfall lots of back issues will probably never *raise* their prices appreciably (and thus will not contribute to comic book inflation), but it will not lower them either, which some might feel should happen.

(6) SYNERGISTIC EFFECTS.

A synergistic effect is one which is self-reinforcing. For example, a high-priced comic book could very well be attractive to a collector *because* it is high-priced. Every collector has a "showpiece" book or books, and these are generally the books with the highest price tags. A collector desiring such books might pay more than their current value just to have them. However, since the number of showpiece books is very small in comparison to the number of different issues on the market, this effect is at best merely marginal.

A different synergistic effect stems from the yearly price increases themselves. Since the prices of back issues increase annually, comic book collectors who sell their books to dealers (and these are by far the largest source of dealers' back issue supplies) require that dealers offer ever-higher buying prices. In order to maintain their profit margins, dealers are then required to raise their selling prices. Since this trade in back issues is the backbone of the comic book market, I believe that this synergistic effect is a prime source of comic book inflation. Many dealers in my acquaintance would charge less for their back issues if they could obtain them for less, because they know that—as emphasized earlier—it is turnover rather than a high profit margin which keeps them in business.

The final synergism, and the final cause of inflation to be considered in this review, is inflation itself. The highest-priced books are exactly the ones most subject to the effects of comic book inflation. This makes it incumbent upon the collector who desires such books for his collection to obtain them forthwith, *as soon as possible*, before they "go out of sight". This of course makes the books "go out of sight" even faster. More unfortunately, due to arbitrary price-fixing, the values of secondary books in runs headed by the "key books" are usually pegged at fixed fractions of the key book prices, so that they are forced to rise as well.

. . . . . .

This ends the first installment of MONEY, THE REAL COLLECTOR'S DREAM. In the next issue of *Collector's Dream*, I will discuss and evaluate possible constraints on the above-reviewed inflationary agents. However, I must emphasize that, based on my knowledge of coin and stamp collecting, I believe that there is *no really effective antidote*, and that the regular and systematic increase in comic book prices will be a fact of life into the forseeable future. My advice to collectors who view this situation with alarm is that they ultimately either (1) stop further collecting and / or leave the hobby (presumably to the grifters and speculators), (2) learn to live without expensive or desirable books, or (3) make arrangements to augment their finances.

WHAT IS G & T ENTERPRISES?

G&T Enterprises is G (George Olshevsky) and T (Tony Frutti). Both of us are comic fans of long standing, and we can trace our interest in comics back to when we were first learning how to read. Now that we've grown up—and some people would dispute the point—we've found comic books and comic art to be more interesting than ever. Both of us collect comics like crazy. George collects Marvel Universe comics going all the way back to 1939, while Tony collects all kinds of superhero and adventure comics as far back as possible. We both believe that comic reading and comic collecting can be sources of boundless joy and interest; G&T Enterprises is our way of sharing our interests with other comic fans.

When Marvel Comics began marching into its current status as the most intricate and interrelated series of comics every published, George saw a need—at the time it was a personal need—to have at hand as complete an index to those books as possible. As a collector and reader heavily into all the multifarious plotlines winding through the MARVEL Universe, he needed to be able to extract at a moment's notice information about which books were already in his collection which titles should be collected, which artists and writers produced which strips, who the major characters were, and so on. Since George was (and is) a computer scientist, he spent the summer of 1970 entering Marvel Comics data onto punched cards. When these were run through a computer using a suitable computer program, the output was just the kind of index he wanted. Every month, as new Marvels were published, more cards were added and fresh printouts created. So it went until early 1975.

When George first constructed the Computer Index, the printout was a massive but manageable 270 pages long. In January 1975, the list had become 666 pages long: immense, and neither handy nor easy to use. It was also increasingly difficult to mail copies to the many comic fans who had gotten wind of the Computer Index Project. So there was a problem: to make up an index to Marvel Comics which would be easy to use, interesting to read, up-to-date and available for a modest sum to any interested comic fan.

Enter Tony Frutti.

MARVEL COMICS INDEX

George met Tony through a comic book auction, and it wasn't long before the *Marvel Index Project* was born. We figured that fans wouldn't be very interested in a dry *listing*. Rather, we believed that fans would like to see the actual books themselves. Pictures, photographs, always help to break up pages of text and keep things interesting.

What better pictures than the very *Marvel* covers themselves, all the *Marvel* covers!? So we put our heads together: George supplied the information and Tony supplied the cash. We scared up a printer who had confidence in our book, ironed out a mess of practical details, and printed The Amazing Spider-Man, Part One of the complete Marvel Comics Index, in January 1976.

Well, now we've had almost a year's experience in publishing our own material. Everything that can possibly screw up a fan project has been thrown at us, from exorbitant government ripoff taxes, to missed deadlines, to paper mill strikes, to plate defects, to postal strikes, to scratched negatives, to undelivered paper. We have survived; even better, we can see the time fast approaching when we will branch out and do a whole lot more projects we've only been able to dream about till now!

The Marvel Comics Index is now at Part Three. Part Four will feature a dynamic *Jim Steranko* painting and will index the *Fantastic Four* and the *Silver Surfer*. If all goes well, it will become available during January 1977. Then we will rapidly follow up with Part Five, *The Mighty Thor*, featuring a dramatic cover by *Tim Conrad* which is already in hand, and Part Six, *Heroes from Strange Tales*, with a *Tim Conrad* cover painting of Dr. Strange capturing all the mystery that *Steve Ditko* infused into the character so many years ago. The Marvel Comics Index remains the backbone of G & T Enterprises' current publishing schedule.

COLLECTOR'S DREAM

Our second publication, *The Collector's Dream*, represents a partial fulfillment of one of our long-standing wishes. Of late, we have become increasingly discouraged with the very real deficiency of inexpensive, high-level publications dealing with the hobby of *comic collecting*. Look on any newsstand and you'll find a dozen magazines on motorcycling, another dozen on automobiles, several on model trains and planes, several on coins and stamps; but *none* on comics! We believed that *comic fandom* was big enough and interested enough in itself that it could support a general-circulation magazine, and we were willing to start one up.

Initially we wanted the advertisers to bear the cost of the magazine. If the magazine were available *free* to kids and fans and collectors, we figured this would allow us to distribute as many as 30,000 copies, or more, all around the world. Alas, the global inflation made the advertising rates prohibitively high. So we put a light cover price of *30 cents* on the book and lowered the print run.

Now that we've lowered the ad rates for *The Collector's Dream*, we'd like to emphasize the importance of *repeat advertising*. First, the repeat advertiser gets a *5% discount* on his ads. Second, repeat ads give us assurance of having a certain amount of revenue on hand for each issue. Third, we're better able to plan our issues in advance knowing that a certain number of pages are taken. If you intend to place repeat ads but would like to change your ad copy from issue to issue or from time to time, this is no problem because all you pay for is the *space*. Just make sure the new ad copy reaches us before the ad deadline.

Another service we will provide for *The Collector's Dream* advertisers is *typesetting*. For $30 (depending on ad copy) per page we will lay out and typeset your ad from copy which you provide. Naturally, even if your typeset ad is to run in several consecutive issues, the typesetting charge applies only once. We can also provide a stat of your ad which you might want to run elsewhere. Typsetting makes price lists and text beautifully legible and a real treat to read! And we'll screen pictures and photographs into the bargain.

G&T Enterprises will pay about 1 cent per word for articles of general interest about comic books. All we insist upon is that the articles come up to some standard of literacy (we *hate* having to edit!) and be informative and uplifting. If we buy your article, we will pay on publication and *you* will retain all copyright and subsequent publication rights, no strings attached. We will even pay royalties if we reprint your article! Now that's fair, isn't it? For further details, simply write us.

The Collector's Dream is based on the idea that comics are *fun*, and that writing articles about comics and reading what others have to say is a sterling way to expand one's love for the medium. If you find comics intriguing, offbeat, unusual, fanciful, whimsical, charming, delightful, beautiful and keen, then we believe *The Collector's Dream* deserves your support.

FUTURE PROJECTS

And what have we got coming up? Well, imagine a huge chart nine feet long and five feet high, printed in color and containing a complete chronology of the *Marvel Universe* right from the very beginning of the Worlds Without End, following up the time-lines of all the different branches and worlds into the yet-untold future. Follow *Kang the Conqueror* as he becomes *Pharaoh Rama-Tut, The Scarlet Centurion* and *Immortus*; or follow the *Guardians of the Galaxy* as they struggle to end the invasion of the Badoon two thousand years in the future. Watch *King Kull's Atlantis* topple into the sea, to give rise to the *Underworld Kingdom of Kala* and the *Antarctic Domain of Namor*. Watch the *Kree* land on earth the first time, to begin the reign of the *Inhumans*. Watch the birth of *Galactus*, the *Watchers*, the *Skrulls*. All this, and much, much more, on one chart *on your wall*! Research for a big project, soon to be announced by *Stan Lee* himself, is now underway, and hence will come the G&T Enterprises *Marvel Chronology Wall Chart*.

There's more.

Our *Marvel Comics Index* has been so well received that we are now organizing a similar project for *Marvel's Golden Age*. At long last, the entire run of Marvel's super-hero comics issued during 1939-1956, when they were known as *Timely* and *Atlas Comics*, is about to be indexed to a depth unprecedented anywhere. The final product, still years away, will be a *deluxe hardcover* volume exhibiting all *441 Timely / Atlas* super-hero comic covers in *full color*, with all the interconnections between those comics and the Marvel Universe explained in detail. We have also been accumulating information about the nearly 200 artists and writers of those early strips, so our *Glorious Timely Project* will truly be a blockbuster!

G&T Enterprises is our way of having fun with our comics. We have lots of other projects than the ones described above, like indexes to DC, *The Collector's Delight* (a companion to *The Collector's Dream*), maps of the various comic universes, and so forth, still in the bare-bones planning stages. We believe that our projects are exciting and interesting to fans, and that the research we do is accurate and painstaking enough to satisfy the most demanding standards (if not, we can always publish corrections!). We are grateful for the interest and support that have been shown in our efforts over the past year, and we hope that our future plans, when they finally come together, will continue in the same vein.

—George Olshevsky
—Tony Frutti

DO IT

Advertise in Collector's Dream Magazine and do it frequently.

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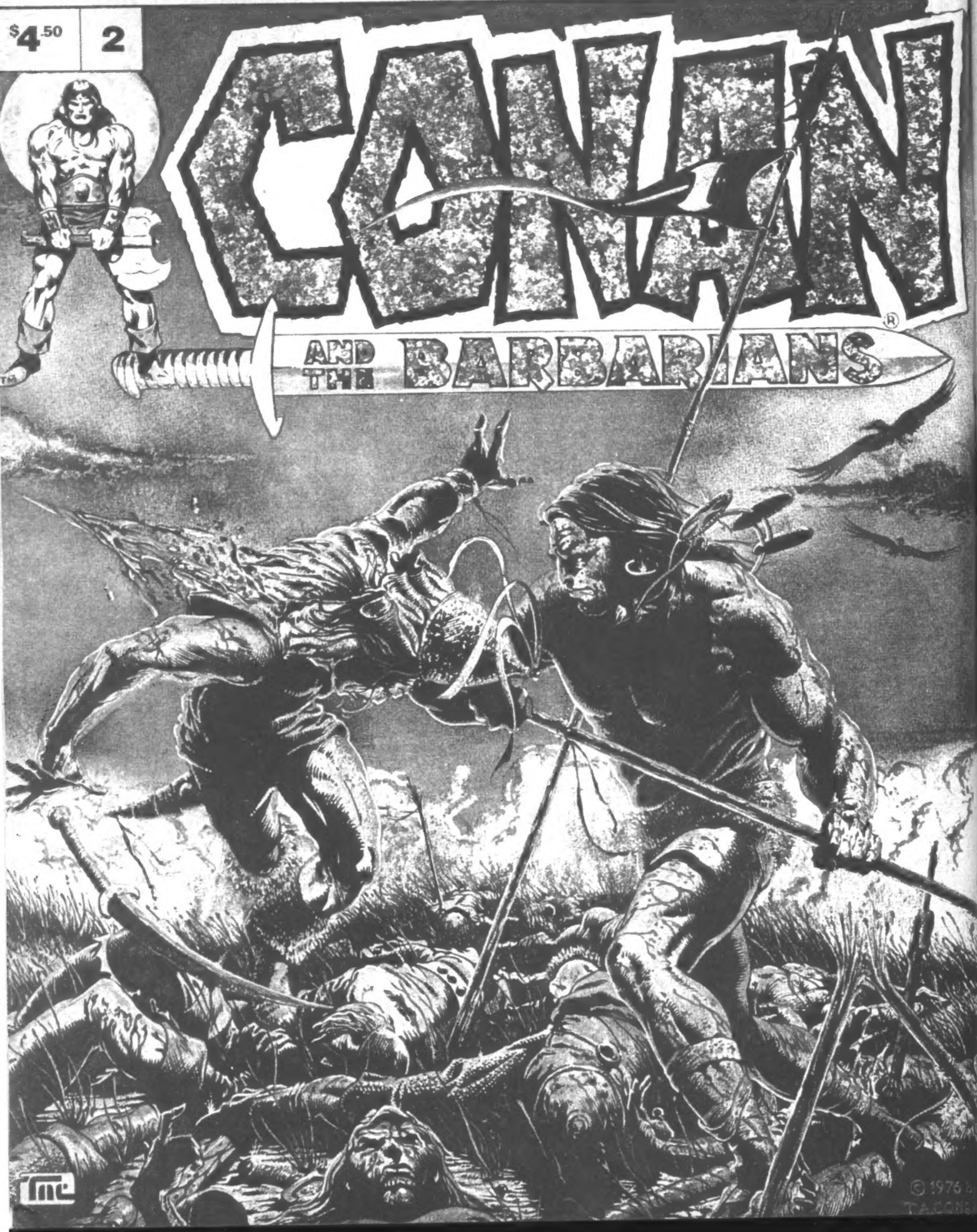


Collector's Dream INTERVIEW:

Tim Conrad

Tim Conrad, a young fantasy artist from Springfield, Illinois, whose work appears every so often in Marvel's Savage Sword of Conan, *was a guest of the Silver Snail Comic Shop at the Alpha Draconis science fiction and fantasy convention held in Toronto the weekend of Hallowe'en, 1976. This presented a golden opportunity for your intrepid* Collector's Dream *editor and publisher to put together an interview with Tim, evidently the first one to see print. We were particularly interested in Tim and his work since his art appears on the cover of our* Marvel Comics Index, *Part Two, and is scheduled to appear on the covers of Parts Five and Six as well. All three covers are excellent and were done in record time miles ahead of our deadlines — a true joy and virtue in this field. While at Alpha Draconis, Tim displayed a few of his pieces and picked up a first prize ribbon in the "Fantastic Art" category, ahead of noted pro artist Kelly Freas.*

We commandeered a tape recorder and some tape, and managed somehow to entice Tim and his companion Joyce, along with Rob MacIntyre [whose photographs of Tim decorate this interview], Ken Steacy [a local artist / illustrator whose work appears in Orb magazine, among other places] and Franc Reyes [newly arrived from the Philippines] into the squalor of Olshevsky's high-rise apartment, to conduct the interview which appears in this issue.

Tim is in his mid twenties, tall and thin, and speaks with a trace of a midwestern drawl. He turned out to be surprisingly outspoken and articulate, with only the briefest of questions needed to elicit a stream of commentary. Editing the transcript of the interview was virtually unnecessary.

The interview itself started out in a somewhat formal manner and took the better part of an hour to loosen up. Then the rest of the guests began joining in, all traces of formality vanishing as Olshevsky tried to keep up with the bull session, moving the microphone madly from person to person. [The individual speakers in the interview are identified by their initials.] Altogether about one and three quarters hours of tape were consumed, but as usual some of the best parts of the interview came out during the breaks, when the recorder was off, and hence must remain forever unpublished.

"There's no such thing as the creation of something from nothing. The most a person can do as far as creativity goes is re-organization of previously existing elements."

"If you want something real, you can go out and take a picture of it. It's more exciting... more of a challenge, to make it up. I'm into trying to make the unreal real."

"I want to do pure comics... comic novels that can't be done into movies, that can't be made into straight prose books, and develop that medium the same way as those others."

G.O.: Greetings, Tim. Comic fans and art fanciers everywhere have been following your art for the past two or three years, and all have noticed that the earliest examples...

T.C.: ...are best forgotten. (Laughter)

G.O.: Uh—bear a certain similarity to the work of well-known artist Barry Smith. Certainly I have heard you accused of "swiping" Smith's style. Would you perhaps care to comment on this?

T.C.: That's obviously so. What it gets down to is the fact that the first job I ever got with Marvel was based on that young Conan drawing which I did originally as a Christmas present for Joyce. The whole point of it was to draw a picture of Barry Smith's Conan with Marlon Brando's face. I had it with me at a convention in New York City when Roy Thomas came along, saw it and decided he wanted to use it. Barry got very perturbed about it and wasn't at all pleased with it.

At the time I hadn't been reading comics for years and years. When Smith's Conan came out I picked up a copy just out of curiosity because it wasn't a superhero. That was the reason I originally quit reading comics: I got kind of burned out on superheroes. I was very impressed with all of Smith's subsequent work. I was really into that style—in fact it was the only style that I was familiar with at the time. Then as I started to get into it, having to do it professionally and learning to draw a little better, I found out how limited the things I could learn from Barry Smith were. I learned all I wanted to and then I had to backtrack to study Neal Adams, Jim Steranko and all those other artists I had missed entirely because I wasn't reading comics when their work was coming out.

G.O.: So then your professional work has been a learning experience for you. Tell me: Had you ever had any formal art training before you became a professional?

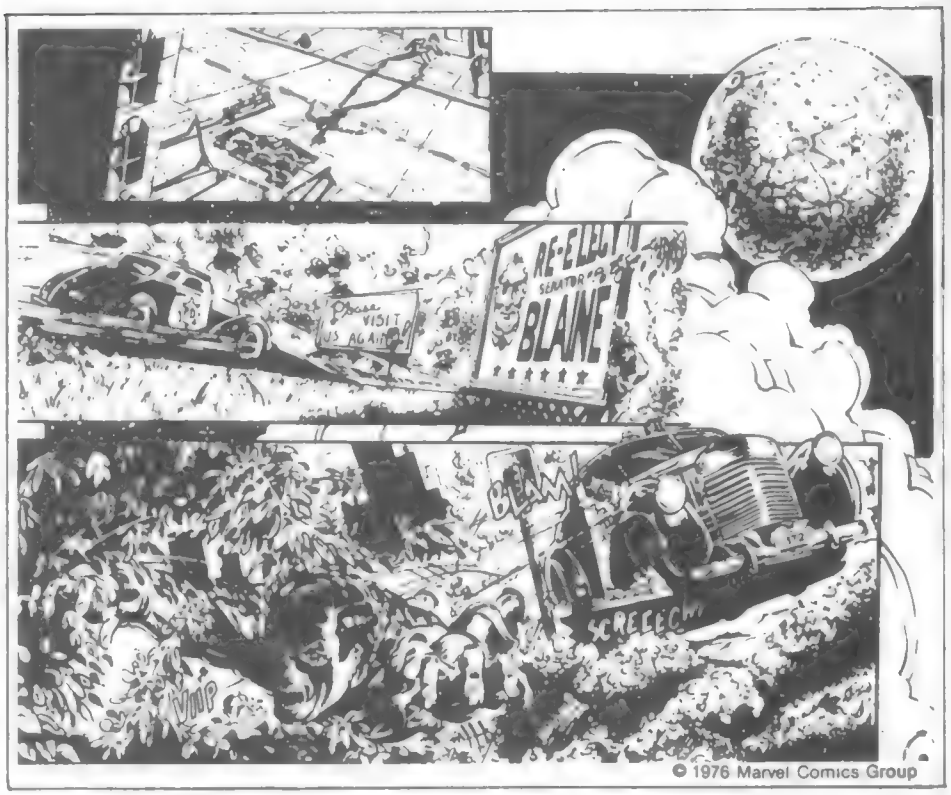
T.C.: No! That's the problem!

G.O.: I see. You just started out by making a drawing of Conan and showing it to them, and they asked you for more.

T.C.: I guess so. You know, I had always been drawing and I'd even actually done a few comic pages just playing around. I had always wanted to do it, of course, but I figured I was years away from being good enough to do it professionally. Then suddenly Roy Thomas was saying, "Here, do this story!" I had little choice then to do the story; it's been a matter of learning how to do it.

G.O.: Your motif, your field, then, is comic art. Do you plan to stay with comic art or do you plan to branch out?

T.C.: I want to branch comic art out. That's what I want to do. I want to do graphic stories, but I don't want to do thirty-cent comic books especially. They're all right—it's great practice and it's good learning and experience for the kinds of things I want to do—but I want to do things more along the lines of novels with good stories. The main thing is I want to do good stories in the medium. A few of the Europeans are getting there, but I have yet to see very many good stories.



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"I want to branch comic art out."

G.O.: A lot of your work is fantastic, fantasy, in nature. You tend to avoid, or at least you have avoided in the past, stories concerning realistic superheroes, funny animals, westerns, etc.

T.C.: And I'll tend to avoid them in the future.

G.O.: So you enjoy fantasy; it's "good stuff"?

T.C.: Well, for one thing it's easier to draw, because if you're doing something that isn't real in the first place nobody can say, "You did it wrong!" If you want something real, you can go out and take a picture of it. It's more exciting, it's more of a challenge, to make it up. It's more of an ego trip. It's more of an escape from reality. I much prefer fantasy, anything unreal. I'm into trying to make the unreal real. I'll take something as fantastic as possible and make it real by the way it is rendered.

G.O.: Frank Frazetta has often stated that he wants to make the "unreal real". Has Frazetta been an influence in your work?

T.C.: Lately he has, now that I'm starting to do some color stuff. I like Frank's color work, the way he uses color. I like his figures and all that, too, but it's not the kind of thing I want to do. To me, he's not real enough; he doesn't seem to be making the "unreal real". Perhaps he's making the unreal *more* than real. His figures are real, but they're exaggerated. It's like Corben's reality, that kind of reality where the rendering and the shadows are very real but the figures themselves are completely unreal. I want to get into "real" real!

G.O.: Uh—"real" real?

T.C.: "Real" real! (Laughter)

G.O.: All right.

T.C.: *Unreal* stuff. That's what it is.

G.O.: Well, you've got a Barry Smith influence and a touch of Frazetta. Can you recount a few of the other artists whose work has influenced yours?

T.C.: Neal Adams, Lou Fine. I love Lou Fine; I'm getting into a lot of Lou Fine stuff. I go through phases. Harold Speed, who wrote a book called *The Science and Practice of Drawing* in 1907 which is mandatory for anybody who wants to learn how to draw. It's just the most fantastic book you could find. His basic suggestion is to look at everything, absorb everything no matter what it is, in art, in the real world—everything—then take what you like, use it, incorporate it in your own work. When you really get down into studying all those other artists, you find that's what they all do. It's a learning process of picking the best of everything that you like. Since everybody likes different things, everybody eventually evolves what comes to be recognized as his individual style. Trace Frazetta back and he starts out with Hal Foster swipes and that kind of stuff; then he develops and gets into other things.

G.O.: Al Capp...

T.C.: Well, Frazetta worked with Al capp for so long.

I'm at the stage now where what is "my style" is just beginning to appear. I'm just starting to see what it's going to look like. I never knew before and I'm in the process of absorbing from artists like Lou Fine, Neal Adams, Gustav Dore, Roger Dean, a little bit of Beardsley—not a whole lot, but a little. A lot of Dore. I like that.

Who else? Just anybody, everything. It doesn't really matter—I can find something to like in everybody. Jack Kirby. I love Jack Kirby! There's very little in his stuff that *I* want to use, but there's a little bit. I'll get it anywhere I can find it.

G.O.: Have you anything to say about inkers and those who render art? For example, if someone inks your work, do you think that they would generally tend to enhance it or that they would generally tend to detract from it?

T.C.: Everything of mine that has been published so far I've inked myself, so I really don't know. The only pieces of mine that someone else inked were inked by a friend in Springfield. He took photostats of my pencils and inked them. He's not a professional inker. He's doing it mainly to learn how to ink, just for practice, so I really don't know what my material would look like inked by someone else. I *would* like to see some inked by someone else, but it's just that everything I've pencilled so far I've put a lot of work into and I don't want to take the chance of someone else inking it. I'd even rather do it myself and not do as good a job as someone else possibly could.

At Marvel I would have no say over who inks my work. If I could choose my inker, I'd probably let someone else ink. For example, I'd like to see Barry Smith ink it—I'm sure *he* would enhance it. But by the same token, there are those at Marvel that I am sure would detract from it.

Also, I'm getting to the point where my pencils are very loose. Since I know I'm going to be inking, the pencils don't have to be that tight; I'd just as soon draw it once in the rendering. So even though I'm curious as to what it might look like with someone else's inks, at this stage I'd rather do my own. That's the only way I could learn how to ink.

Marvel wants me to do other inking. Roy Thomas wanted me to ink a current Buscema story that's running in *Savage Sword*—"The People of the Black Circle". I like to ink other people's pencils, because it's a great learning process. You can pick up an awful lot from inking other artists' pencils, particularly someone with tight pencils.

G.O.: Barry Smith on the current Bran Mak Morn story in *Savage Sword?*

T.C.: Yes—that was great! I had mixed feelings about it in the beginning, but it turned out to be a great learning experience. I got to practice on his pages before I got to mine, which helped mine look a little better.

G.O.: How much of that story is Barry Smith's and how much is actually yours?

T.C.: About the first five and a half pages were really tight pencils. Up to page 10 his pencils gradually loosened up; the last couple of pages that he did were just blue pencil layouts. I had to do all the background work and all the details. The last five pages of that first part were entirely my pencils and inks. The 23 pages of the second part are all mine.

G.O.: Have other media had influence upon your art? Music, television, motion pictures, radio, literature?

T.C.: Oh, yes, for sure! I'm influenced by movies—especially for the narrative technique. Lately, even more, I've been watching a lot of old horror movies to do the black and white stories, for lighting and shadows. That's a big influence. Music doesn't have a direct influence on the art itself. I listen to music all the time I'm drawing. I guess the biggest musical influence would come from David Bowie, simply because in his songs and in his interviews he's concerned with *how* to do it. Whatever it is you want to do, he can tell you how to do it. I draw the way he writes music, the way he *says* he writes music. I follow the same process; that's how I've gotten where I've gotten today. I couldn't draw at all if I didn't follow that process.

"it's a dead end doing diversionary stories all the time."

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G.O.: Could you perhaps let us in on that process.....

T.C.: David Bowie writes music the way Harold Speed tells you how to draw. In Bowie's case, he *listens* to everything, takes what he likes from everything he hears and incorporates it into his music. You read interviews with David Bowie and people ask him, "Where do you get your music?" and he answers, "I *steal* it!" He gets a little piece here and a little piece there. That's the way I draw. I wonder about the whole aspect of talent; I don't have any! I can't definitely say there's no such thing as talent, since I see other artists who seem to have talent. They seem to just be able to sit down and draw. They *seem* to, since I've never seen them work and I don't know exactly how they do it. But as far as I'm concerned, I've never been able to do that. I'm more interested in the final product looking as good as it can; I incorporate as much as I can from every artist and hopefully the finished product is justified.

G.O.: So you believe there is no real creation, just a synthesis?

T.C.: It's the imagination, it's what the imagination is. People look at my work and they say, "Boy! You've got some imagination!", and that's true, but it's only true in the context of what the word itself really implies. There's no such thing as the creation of something from nothing. The most a person can do as far as creativity goes is re-organization of previously existing elements. That's what I'm into—re-organizing previously existing elements to suit a new format, a new purpose, to tell a new story, to create a new effect. That's imagination as far as I can see it.

G.O.: Who would you say are your favorite film directors? What do you like about them?

T.C.: My all-time favorite film director is John Schlesinger, probably. He did *Midnight Cowboy, Day of the Locust* and *Marathon Man* (which I haven't seen yet). Alfred Hitchcock is great for panel compositions and narrative technique. He's really good at inanimate objects which Joyce keeps telling me to use, and how to create tension, which is nice to know for comics.

K.S.: How do you feel about Ken Russell?

T.C.: Ken Russell *has* to be the *worst* director! That guy's so bad! I just can't believe how bad that guy is. He is so crude and offensive, so garish and pretentious. I must say I *did* enjoy *The Devils*—until I found out it had nothing to do with the reality of the situation portrayed. Nothing at all; it didn't happen that way, which was kind of disappointing. That movie *Tommy* was just the worst thing!

G.O.: Can you elaborate on the books and comics you read and enjoy most? For example, do you collect comics yourself?

T.C.: I buy a few but I don't really collect any. I buy by the artist, usually. I go downtown every week and look over what's out, and if there's any kind of artwork that appeals to me I'll pick it up. As far as hard core collecting, I don't. I used to be a hard core Edgar Rice

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Burroughs collector, as hard core as I could afford when I was 12 years old. I just like the artwork now, mainly because there aren't that many good stories. I'm in the process of learning how to do art so I can do good stories, but the stories, particularly in the commercial comics, leave me pretty cold.

Sorry, Roy!

My all time favorite author is William Faulkner. I also enjoy Franz Kafka, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot. I have a degree in Creative Writing, and I studied literature in college. That's always been my main interest, perhaps even beyond my artwork. I got into artwork primarily after I found that a full knowledge of great literature is just totally impractical and useless in the real world; you just don't eat! Nobody pays you to know about James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Walt Whitman is my favorite poet. Also E.E. Cummings. As for fantasy-type literature, I like Mervyn Peake; the Gormenghast books are really good. I used to read continuously, but unfortunately I don't have much time for reading any more. I like books that are significant and books you can really get into and have a lot of substance. I get more pleasure out of figuring things out than just reading—there's more enjoyment for me in analyzing a story and trying to figure out how it was put together, than just in reading it.

G.O.: Have you read *Finnegan's Wake?*

T.C.: I don't think anybody can "read" *Finnegan's Wake!*

G.O.: Right!

T.C.: I've read all the books *about Finnegan's Wake.* I have *Finnegan's Wake*; it is the ultimate literary creation. It is so good and so perfect that no one can understand it—it's that good. A mind-boggling experience.

G.O.: Did you know that *Finnegan's Wake* was made into a movie?

T.C.: I've never seen it. I've seen the movie of *Ulysses*, which was just totally

"I'm doing something that's totally unreal, drawing people and events that are completely improbable."

absurd. It's crazy to make movies out of any of those; they're pure literature.

G.O.: I found the movies more incomprehensible than the books.

T.C.: For sure! The books are such pure literature; like Peter Weiss' *Marat Sade.* You can't transcribe that play into any other medium without losing 90% of what it's there for. I've seen the movie they made of that and I saw the movie before I saw the play. I was really impressed with the movie until I saw the play and realized that it's pure theatre just like Joyce's works are pure literature.

I want to do pure comics, comics and comic novels that can't be done into movies, that can't be made into straight prose books, and develop that medium the same way as those others. I don't want to carry it to quite that extreme—so that no one can understand, because to me that's the most important factor in any kind of creative effort, to make people understand. Kurt Vonnegut, another favorite author of mine, can say very significant things in an especially entertaining and easily understandable way, and that's what I'm striving for as far as story lines go.

G.O.: I find that a great deal of comics today are derivative, in the sense that they're direct adaptations of works which have appeared in other media. For example, Conan was originally a short-story character, *Logan's Run* and *Planet of the Apes* are derived from motion pictures (*Planet*, the motion picture, was in turn derived from a story!) I find a lot of these works are not as interesting as they could be if they were purely created for the comic book, as was *Superman* in 1938 and the *Fantastic Four* in 1961.

T.C.: That's very true, and it has a lot to do with the economics of the industry. It's much easier to adapt something else than it is to invent a new idea. It's a lot easier to sell something that people are already familiar with. That's one of the main factors. They're dealing with pieces that aren't so pure in their original media that they can't be adapted, especially films. There's such an affinity between films and comics, and fantasy stories by writers like Robert E. Howard are so visual; they're naturally adaptable.

The stories themselves were written in a day and age prior to the current pre-occupation with visual stimuli which grew out of films and television. When movies first appeared they were all based on books or plays. It took a while for the audiences to become well-enough aware of the inaccuracies of that particular medium to be able to accept and understand works that were totally devised for that medium. Fellini couldn't have made *Juliet of the Spirits* in 1920. Nobody would have understood it. It's pure cinema. The same with comics: it's a young medium, in about the same state that movies were in in the 30's. The audience has to become sophisticated enough to be able to understand the language of the medium. They've been around for 30-40 years now and a few people are starting to become aware. That's why a lot of people are getting bored with superhero comics; they've passed that point in their sophistication.

G.O.: But you figure that comics have a long way to go in their evolution?

T.C.: Oh, they've got a *long* way to go, a *long* way to go!

G.O.: Have you any ideas on what the ultimate comic book might look like, say, 50 to 100 years from now?

T.C.: Oh, no way! If I knew that, I'd sit down and do it!

G.O.: Naturally!

T.C.: And no one would understand it, and I'd starve!

You can't jump ahead, that's the problem. Fellini couldn't have made his movies without D.W. Griffith doing his; it's the process of evolution. You just

have to deal with it in terms of where you are in that process. I'm at this point now; I've no idea where it's going to go. I have a vague idea where I want to take it; I don't know if situations will allow me to take it there, but I'll try.

I'd like to try to design some way to do *sound* comics. They need music, like background music; they're drawn that way (at least mine are). I try to pick out some kind of music that has the particular feel and mood of a piece I might be working on.

G.O.: You yourself aren't currently a starving artist, is that right?

T.C.: If I were to limit myself to just doing comics I would be. I would be a starving artist considering the amount of work I put into the pages that I do, particularly for Marvel. When I draw pages for Marvel, I'm losing money. I put more time into them than they pay me for. The only way to make up for that is to do cover paintings in between and sell the original pages when they're returned. By doing that I've gotten out of the starving artist class—just barely.

G.O.: How's progress on your upcoming adaptation of Robert E. Howard's novel *Almuric?*

T.C.: The pages are coming along, but slowly, as I have all these other assignments in between which pay the rent. I've pencilled the first two and one half issues. The entire novel is going to be done in four issues. Originally it was going to be done in three, but I realized if we did it in three, justice couldn't be done to it. So Roy said I could go ahead and do it in four. We're not sure exactly when or where it's going to appear, but I know the first issue won't appear until I have all four of them done. It's going to be called "Warrior in a World Beyond". Hopefully all four issues will be pencilled before the end of this year; if it's going to be a color book, the inking won't take long at all. The last time I talked to Roy there was a kind of pernicious rumor that it might be appearing in a black and white book since Marvel is planning a John Carter of Mars series, in which case they're not sure they want *two* series about adventures on another planet. The artwork is so far designed to appear in color, so if I have to redraw it for black and white it's going to be a real hassle. I'm hoping it will be in color and that we'll get it out in the next 6-8 months.

G.O.: You figure that comic books today are not very interesting and you find them very dull reading. What would you do to make them more interesting?

T.C.: I'd do some good stories. The art today is incredible, just fantastic. It's almost unbelievable how many really fine artists there are working in the field. But the stories are so insipid it's incredible. Unfortunately you can't write good stories for the commercial type comics on the stands, because the stories within are designed for a specific audience. That's fine and I believe they should continue to churn out those comics for that audience, but we also need another field, another branch for another audience, an older audience. The problem is being alleviated by time, and it's changing the consciousness of adult America, which formerly looked down on

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"I'd like to see Superman and Batman drawn with wrinkles when they bend their arms."

[*continued on page 16*]

"When I draw pages for Marvel, I'm losing money."

comics.

G.O.: That's a difficult job!

T.C.: Yes, a very difficult job. We're trying to alter that consciousness, and the only way to do that is to write stories that they can appreciate and accept, and later worry about how to become aware that it's there. The first step is to have it there for them to look at. It is starting to happen. I have high hopes; if we're sitting around here doing this, then it must be happening a little bit.

G.O.: Thanks for the compliment. What particular books do you figure are less offensive in this respect than, say, the mass of them?

T.C.: Even in the commercial field there have been some that I've been really impressed with story-wise as well as art-wise. Starlin's "Warlock" stories were really nice, and his "Captain Marvel" were pretty good. Howie Chaykin's narrative style is fantastic. His stories are different: Dominic Fortune, Solomon Kane. We need a market for stories that are good stories, good adventures that are fun to read but have something more to them. It's like Robert E. Howard's adventures as compared to Michael Moorcock's adventures. They both have tons of action, but Moorcock's stuff has a little more depth. It might just be me, but when I read something, when I watch a movie, I like being more than just entertained. I want to have something to think about, something to play with, a new perspective on reality—looking at reality through fantasies—anything beyond just simple diversion. Diversion is just useless: Why waste your time just diverting yourself from anything? It's a dead end doing diversionary stories all the time. For a certain audience and for everybody at a certain stage in their development, it's fine.

I think that where underground comics came from was the fact that all the people during the 1950's and 1960's had all reached a point where things got so repetitive that no one could handle it and everyone got tired of it, and it all came out underground. When they first came out, everybody went overboard and crazy with it because someone realized that they *could*. Over the years the junk has begun to filter itself out, with the good ones surviving and the bad ones not. That is the natural evolution of the medium. We're working on our end and I guess it's coming along; I won't know how people will react to my stories until they're done.

G.O.: What do you think of Jim Warren's publications? Those aren't really intended for children's consumption. Do you find them more adult, more interesting?

T.C.: I think they generally have better art. I think a lot of times the stories and the narrative techniques suffer because the art is a little *too* decorative in a lot of places—too much drawing to show off how good those guys can draw, with little concern with the narrative aspects. Jose Ortiz drew a story—I can't recall its title just now—which came out around Christmas last year, with a little manger, little devils, little angels and such, about five pages long. There was no text; it was just incredible. I couldn't believe it!

R.M.: Moebius' work is much like that —

T.C.: Moebius' color is just fantastic! They've got a lot of good artists. Warren is one of those companies whose magazines I go through each month to see who did what artwork. I never expect much from the stories, but the artwork—I can learn a lot from those guys!

G.O.: Can you comment on stereotyping and sexism in comics? Are comics being victimized by such images?

T.C.: Positively they are. It's the marketability of it. They've found images that sell and that's what they're selling. They always will. It's a problem now of finding other material to sell, too. I think they should keep publishing *Superman*. There are always going to be 12-year-old kids. But there's not a whole lot that can be done with Superman and Lois Lane after 10 years; it becomes stale and pointless after a while, until there's nothing to it at all. Just form and no content.

G.O.: Is there any comic that you have followed continuously for 10 years?

T.C.: There are artists whose careers I've continuously followed for 10 years, but no character I've followed for 10 years. My God, I'd be bored to death. Are you kidding? I couldn't do it!

G.O.: What I wanted to draw out from you when I asked you about stereotyping and sexism in comics was some commentary concerning how every woman in comics is always drawn beautiful, and every man is drawn with a muscular physique. I sort of get sick and tired of seeing these huge-muscled guys and gorgeous women all the time. I also get bored with seeing the same person dressed up in fifty different costumes becoming fifty different superheroes or superheroines.

T.C.: I'd like to change that a lot. It's something I've tried to do and have had very little success with. It never seems to make it through the editorial offices. I want the main character in the *Almuric* series to be short and not very good looking; a Charles Bronson type. Where he's not the Greek-God type, he's a real person. They have this strange theory down at the office that the average reader won't identify with him. I've *never* been able to identify with someone who's big and strong and handsome! I don't look that way. I wish I did, but I don't. I guess if anything, it would be envy!

I find it much easier to identify with less than perfect people, and I would think the average reader would, too. I don't understand why they don't want to try that, just as an experiment. They don't want to break out of established, successful formulas. I was at a convention in Chicago this August and this guy was looking at my artwork. He said, "You always draw ugly people. How come your people are all so ugly?" I guess it's an over-compensation, an over-reaction to the fact that they want them all beautiful. How many beautiful people do *you* see? There are a few, but the fact that beauty is so over-emphasized makes all the rest of us feel terrible!

G.O.: It does sell a lot of cosmetics!

T.C.: Yeah—a lot of deodorants and stuff, but it doesn't make for any kind of reality. I'd like to get away from that and

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try some real people.

R.M.: Don't you think that a lot of the comics themselves, when they deal with beautiful women, have actually simply simplified all the features to the point where they all look alike, they aren't individuals?

J.: They're harder to draw...

R.M.: Yes! That's exactly why they've done it: Because a stereotyped image is easier to draw!

T.C.: Well, they sure don't pay enough for you to get into doing it different. The perfect example, the very first thing I ever did for Marvel: The female lead in that piece was done from photographs of Marlene Dietrich's face. She's got a fantastic face! Now, just by some strange coincidence I sent those pages off to New York and about a week after I mailed them out, Starlin's Warlock came out with the Matriarch, whom he drew from photographs of Marlene Dietrich! I don't know how much that had to do with it, but when my story came out, Johnny Romita had gone over it and whited out the faces and drawn these absolutely incredibly bad stereotyped cartooned faces on this woman. The character was stupid enough to begin with in the story, but when he went and did that and it came out, she was just a piece of paper.

R.M.: I don't understand that at all, because it probably would have cost them a buck for the stat, right? They could have worked from the stat and saved you the trouble of being stuck with something you didn't want.

T.C.: The story I just did for them has got a lot of panels and things in it that I had my doubts whether they were going to make it through the office or not. But I rendered the story in such a way that I don't think anybody down at the office knows how to do it without really messing up the art. We'll have to see it when it comes out. The female character in the next story is just the most disgusting-looking creature that's ever been—I mean, she's just *terrible*! That's the *idea*. Hopefully, it'll get through.

G.O.: You feel that they mess with your artwork a lot?

T.C.: Not too much. Just to make it look *pretty*. They want to make all the people pretty. They want beautiful women and handsome men. In fact, that's about the only thing Roy ever says to me about my artwork: "Make your women a little prettier" and "This guy should be a little taller" and "Make this guy tall and handsome". I *want* him short and ugly! Let's try something *different*!

R.M.: It works in the movies, like you were saying about Bronson.

T.C.: Yes, and people *like* Bronson! He's the biggest-selling actor in the world. World-wide, people *love* the guy because he's *ugly*! We can identify with that. To me it would seem so much more effective if the person looked *that* real. We have to get away from judging the person's qualities by the way he looks. Let's have the guy not too good-looking, but still doing the same things. The actions are still there; it's what the guy does. He's not perfect.

R.M.: I've always found the sexism thing is really paradoxical at Marvel, where

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they're giving women characters their own books, like Ms. Marvel and Spider-Woman, but on the cover of *Logan's Run* No. 2 they have women draped all around Logan's feet. Oh save me!

T.C.: It's like the covers of the Conan books. Every Conan cover except for perhaps one or two has Conan fighting a monster with some beautiful woman lying on the ground in absolute terror and horror, completely helpless and useless, just a little decorative thing. That's the formula for the new Almuric covers too; I've rendered a couple of cover ideas already. It's almost standard practice; it sells the books.

R.M.: That's so hypocritical!

T.C.: In itself, I don't think it *is* hypocritical. I'll go along with those elements, I'll put them in there. But I want the woman *doing* something; she'll have a knife, she'll be fighting too. The Almuric series has a female lead in it. In the book itself, she's the standard sword-and-sorcery female lead, there to cry and scream so the guy can kill the monster.

R.M.: But how do they rationalize doing that in their barbarian books and then giving these female characters their own books and hyping up this whole feminist thing?

T.C.: Well, female characters are selling too, so they don't care. They don't know why; it's what's happening, is all. So they're doing more of it. When they came out with Red Sonja, it was a big

experiment. It sold well, so now they're coming out with Ms. Marvel and Spider-Woman. They've found that there's obviously a market. They don't know who's buying them or why, but they know they're selling, so they'll come out with more and make some more money.

I'm trying to change some of this in the Almuric story. The woman is an active participant—

R.M.: What do you want to bet they take the hair off her arms? (Laughter)

T.C.: I'm sure! We were talking about that earlier. Yeah, they'll take the hair off her arms. That woman is supposed to have *hairy arms!* I want that *known!*

R.M.: How do you feel about realism in costuming, as for example Red Sonja's, which is utterly ridiculous?

T.C.: It's stupid!

R.M.: Well, not only is there so little costume, but if she were actually wearing fish mail in that way, she wouldn't have any flesh left!

T.C.: I'd like to see Superman and Batman drawn with wrinkles when they bend their arms and legs. There was this foreign paperback I saw at the last convention. I don't know who published it and I can't remember if it was in a foreign language or not, but it had the most fantastic painting of Spider-Man on the cover. He's got *wrinkles*! You can see his face under his mask like it would really look. Just dynamite—but it's hard to draw, and for the $30 per page nobody's going to do that.

R.M.: I wasn't thinking so much of going into the complete realism of draping and wrinkling of garments, but just realism in the amount a person would wear. For example, if you're wearing armor, then you're also wearing something underneath it to protect you from it. Things like that.

T.C.: I'll buy that. Everything I do, I try to keep that sort of thing in mind. I'm doing something totally unreal, drawing people and events that are completely improbable. The only way I could feel comfortable in that kind of milieu is to make it as real as I can. I'm drawing these creatures on another planet. They still have to work in that environment. It's what makes Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* work so well. This totally ridiculous, improbable thing, with elves, dwarfs, fairies, is so real because everything is there, every little detail! He tells you what smells are in the air, and the colors. He makes it real by infusing it with so much reality.

I would imagine the main reason it's not done commercially is because the artist can't afford the time. You can't create a *Lord of the Rings* in thirty days. Like Barry Smith's last stuff: It was starting to look really good, but you just can't keep it up every month.

G.O.: He was having a hell of a time with the inking —

T.C.: Just everything.

R.M.: Do you think comics could or should go towards a book format?

T.C.: No. I think comics should stay where they are. But we should have the option of another form.

R.M.: Like one-shots. Like a book form complete in itself rather than carrying a continuing character. You'd get a more complete characterization, a longer story and more space to do it in.

G.O.: A 300-page comic novel.

T.C.: Oh, I'd love it! Are you kidding? Give me ten years and about a million dollars to do one! That's the problem—it takes a long time to do something like that. I think the major comic book companies should stay right where they are and do what they've been doing, and work within the production machinery they have available, as long as they want, then move on, if they want.

K.S.: The thing to remember about commercial comics is that they're just that; their whole *raison d'être* is to make money. It's a corporation.

T.C.: That's any publication, any person, any artist. We've got to survive, got to pay the rent, got to eat. You can't knock that.

K.S.: No, I'm not knocking that. We should have the option. It seems aesthetics always gets swept under the carpet when you're dealing with that kind of situation. You can't afford the time or the effort.

R.M.: Consider a writer like James Clavell, who's had three books in 20 years, but all of them excellent and all of them paying well. Why shouldn't an artist take eight years to do a complete work?

T.C.: It's the difference between the guy who wants to make a lot of money and the guy who wants to write a nice story. The option is there.

R.M.: You can't do both? A person like Clavell lives his own way and has a lot of money from sales of his books.

T.C.: It's really hard to convince publishers of that. Give me a lot of time and let me do it really nice and it'll sell well. It's really hard to convince them of that, especially if it's not been done before. They just don't know, and aren't prepared to take any risks. I ask for the chance, but they don't know and you don't know and it might bomb. The best you could do, I suppose, is do it as well as you can and hope for the best.

K.S.: I guess that's the assumption that Berni Wrightson is laboring under right now in his new Frankenstein book. Apparently he's spending two years working on that, and it'll be selling for about $250.

G.O.: Does Joyce model for you?

T.C.: Oh, yes, on occasion, and also some of my other friends. I couldn't do without my friends; they model and criticize and suggest. In fact, the *best* page in the second part of "Worms of the Earth" was laid out by Joyce. You'll recognize it immediately when you see it; it's the best page in the story.

If anybody has the soundtrack to *Planet of the Apes* by Jerry Goldsmith, put that on when you read the second part of "Worms of the Earth", because I drew the whole story with that album in the background. It's just perfect for it!

G.O.: Tim, many, many thanks for your time!

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"...people love [Bronson] because he's ugly! We can identify with that."

Interview ©Tim A. Conrad

Wardworld

MURRAY WARD

EARTH AFTER DISASTER

AFTER DISASTER

Perhaps the best way to open this first column is to indicate what to expect from WARDWORLD as opposed to the work of the other columnists in this magazine.

My approach to comics is twofold, as *fan* and as *critic*. I've found these to be the two ways comics are discussed in fan circles and in the letters I receive from my fan-friends and correspondents.

For my own part, I respond on both levels.

Most of my discussions with editor-in-chief, George Olshevsky, are as *fan*, or from *within* comics. That is to say, we rap on characters and continuity, mostly within the Marvel Universe, as if it was a real world. Stories such as the final resolution of the Fantastic Four-Dr. Doom time machine mix-up in a recent F.F. story, fill us with joy, and attempts to mesh the histories of the Eternals and Planet of the Apes with the rest of the Marvel cosmos, are the subject of whole mini-theses.

Only fans, in the sense of being devoted to comics from *within*, could successfully attempt a massive project such as George and Tony's Marvel Comics Index series. On the other hand, we have the fan-critic, who is concerned with comics from *without*. He follows the various strips more as a chronicle of the works of the creators, than of the adventures of the characters. (Today, it takes a healthy budget to be a *true* completist, considering the large number of titles on the stands.) The critic chooses his comics by creator; not necessarily by character.

Naturally, there are many fans who bridge this gap and approach comics on both levels; myself among them. Most of us start out as "within" fans when younger and gradually develop into "without" critics to sustain interest as our sheer sense of wonder in comics is eroded away.

I want to interest both factions and everyone else in between, with my column. Occasionally, I'll take a straight critical approach, discussing a particular creator's work or a business trend affecting comics. Other times, I'll deal with the pure fun aspect of dealing with the parallel realities of the various comic book universes. Either way, I'll keep you interested. Send all comments on this column to either George and Tony, or to me at: P.O. Box 3693, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

[*continued on page 22*]

AFTER DISASTER

Science fiction in comics doesn't sell, right?

We are told this regularly, year after year, by the professionals in the comics industry. That's why the SF comics published by *EC* were never as popular as their horror titles, why *Warren* publishes SF stories in the guise of horror comics, why *DC* no longer publishes Strange Adventures or From Beyond the Unknown, and why Marvel could not make a go of Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction.

Apparently, the only way to sell a science fiction concept to comic fans is to give that concept a regular feature (as opposed to a series of unconnected stories in an anthology) and to give that feature a lead character who is, to all outward appearances, a super-hero. For instance, Adam Strange or Green Lantern at DC, Captain Marvel or the Silver Surfer at Marvel—are science fiction super-heroes. The fact that ALL super-heroes are a science fiction concept by definition escapes a lot of people, but it's true. They all are—except non-super-powered characters like Batman, and magical characters such as Dr. Strange (magic being fantasy)—and even these characters are often involved in science fiction situations.

In recent years the various comic publishers have been attempting to find a new way to present SF in comics, without super-heroes and without losing money; possibly they've found it. I call it the *"Earth After Disaster"* concept, a name I've borrowed from one such strip, Jack Kirby's Kamandi.

Now, I don't claim these strips are inspired by each other. Indeed, I know they are all individual, separate creations. Nevertheless, they all have one thing in common: they all take place in the near or not-so-near future with the planet Earth in ruins. In Kamandi, the planet has been ravaged by a mysterious "natural disaster" and the animals have taken over from mankind, who have been reduced to animal status. In Planet of the Apes, the world has been changed by nuclear holocaust and the apes have taken over; again, mankind has been reduced to animals, or at least to barbarism. In Killraven / War of the Worlds, perhaps the best such strip, the earth has been radically altered by the invasion of the Martians. The humans, with the exception of a small band of heroes, are either slaves or food of their conquerors. In Hercules Unbound, the world has been wiped out by World War Three, and very few humans are left alive. In Charlton's late Doomsday Plus One, only four humans are left alive after a nuclear war kills off the human race.

ENOUGH ALREADY!

This is overusing the theme! *Earth After Disaster* is unlike the super-hero motif: "hero gains powers—dons costume—fights evil". Not only are there endless variations on that theme, but it's an *optimistic* theme. The underlying idea is that you too could gain a super-power, you too can fight evil and win. The *Earth After Disaster* theme, however, is a *pessimistic* theme. There are occasional moments of brightness in such a strip, but the pervading atmosphere is one of unrelieved hopelessness and gloom. Kamandi can never hope to restore mankind to domination of the world in his lifetime. Humanity will never get the upper hand on the Planet of the Apes. I called Killraven the best strip in this genre since there remained a glimmer of hope that Killraven would conquer the Martians, if not restore the planet. Now that his strip is cancelled, of course, this will never be. Neither Hercules nor the four heroes of Doomsday Plus One can ever undo the damage wrought by the final World War. And so on. One can only read so many of these stories in a row before becoming somewhat suicidal. Look at all these possible dooms awaiting mankind. One of them is bound to occur; there is no hope.

As if these various dooms and disasters weren't bad enough, the writers and editors have stated that these are not alternate possible futures of Earth, but that they are all on the same timeline and ALL of them will come true. The Earth of *Marvel Comics* will experience the terrible futures of Deathlok and Killraven AND the invasion of the Badoon in Guardians of the Galaxy, and possibly the future recounted in Planet of the Apes as well. DC's Earth One will experience both the World War in Hercules AND the "great disaster" in Kamandi. GAAA!

The only ray of hope in the *DC* world is the alternate timeline represented by the Legion of Super-Heroes. The Legion is the only strip about life in the future that presents a hopeful, optimistic outlook ...a future world where science and technology have improved the standard of living, and mankind has expanded to the stars. This too is a science fiction concept, with as many story possibilities as Earth After Disaster, yet no one has seen fit to present it in a strip without super-heroes to insure sales potential.

Following the Marvel timeline, the only comic about the future that avoids the disaster theme is Guardians of the Galaxy. Here, (although a disaster has taken place) the writers and editors wisely allowed the heroes to conquer the invading Badoon, and then sent them out to explore the universe, leaving the ravaged, rebuilding Earth behind them. So far this comic hasn't the optimism of the Legion, but it's a step in the right direction.

I believe the concept of picking up the pieces after the end of the world has been given as many adaptations as it deserves. Some of these strips have merit, but the sheer number of them makes me morbid. If we're going to give science fiction in comics another try, with or without super-heroes, let's forget about *Earth After Disaster*. Let's see *Earth After Advancement!*

By Murray R. Ward

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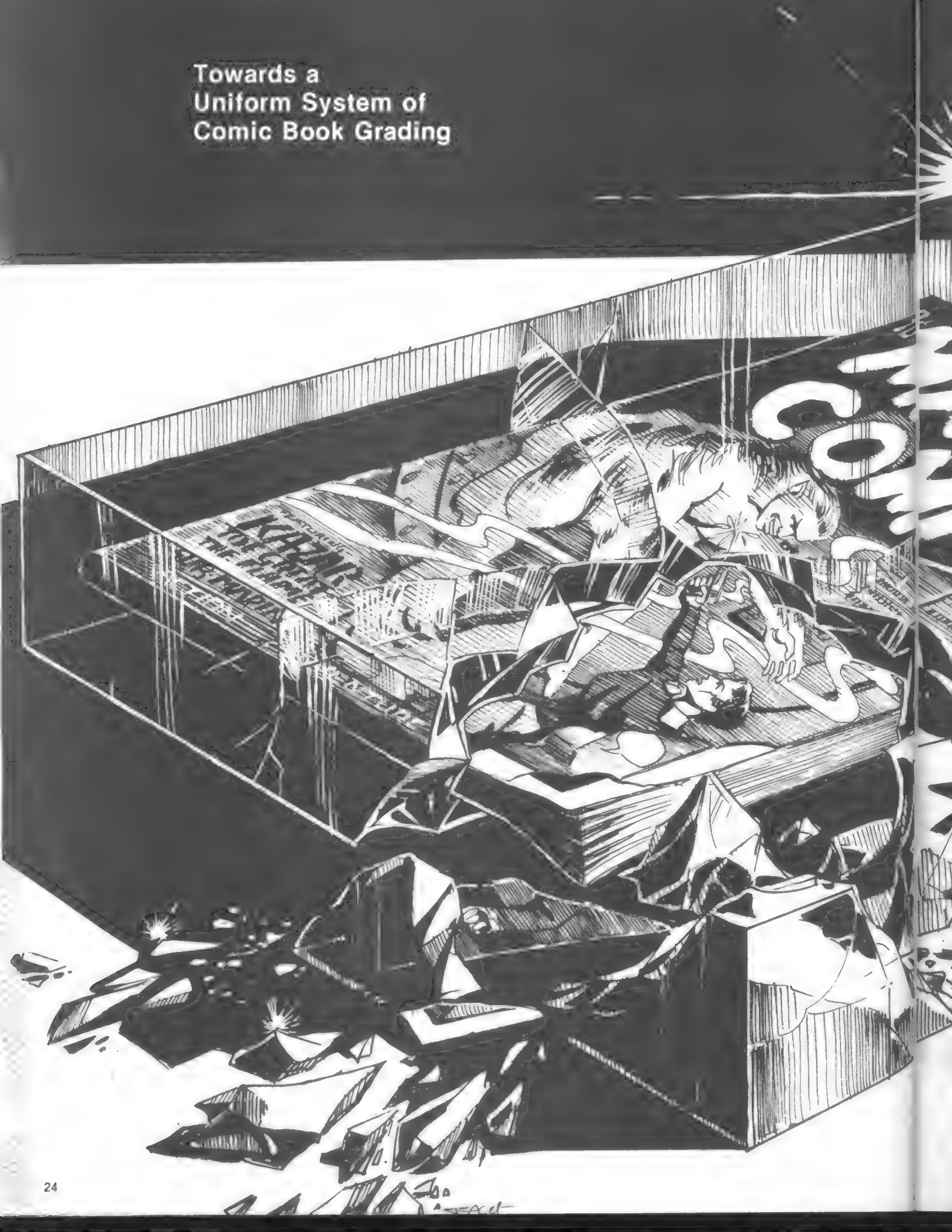
Towards a Uniform System of Comic Book Grading



by George Olshevsky

How many times have you, the collector, ordered comic books by mail which some dealer advertised as being in "near mint" condition, only to receive books which you would not have graded even "very good"? How many times have you, the dealer, been offered a collection of comics all in "mint" condition, only to find—after a lengthy and expensive trip out into the sticks—that the comics were dirty, coverless, badly worn and otherwise uncollectable? I'm sure that every dealer and collector has many stories to tell of being led down the garden path because of inaccurate comic book grading. Clearly, we have identified another Collector's Dream: a uniform, easily understood, practical system for grading comic books by condition with which both dealers and collectors would agree.

Probably no single subject in the entire field of comic collecting is more fraught with inaccuracy, misunderstanding, uncertainty, insecurity, bad judgement, deception or outright fraud than comic book grading. Dealers often are able to increase their profits effortlessly by consistently undergrading the books they buy and overgrading when they sell. Collectors frequently inflate their egos by deluding themselves into believing they own better books than they actually do.

continued

Since the price of a back issue comic book depends heavily on its condition—a comic in "mint" condition can sell for as much as three times the price of the same copy in average used condition—it is necessary for comic book collectors everywhere to have a firm understanding of comic book grading, *even if* it makes no difference to them what grades the books in their own collections might have.

The reason that the price of a particular issue of a comic book increases with better condition is simply that collectors everywhere prefer to own the nicer copies. Given a choice between two copies of the same comic in different conditions, it is a rare collector indeed who will not immediately select the better book. Comics in nice condition are more attractive to the eye, more closely approximate the original appearance of the book on the newsstand, are more durable against aging and are in general scarcer than comics in more used condition. Better condition books look, feel and even *smell* better.

One result of the increased desirability of better condition books has been to turn ordinary, harmless comic collectors into "condition fanatics". I know many collectors who examine minutely the current week's shipment of new comics, spending as much as an hour going through a dealer's entire stock looking for the "best" copies, painstakingly checking for nicks, dented corners, properly aligned staples, and so forth.

Collectors to whom the *contents* of a book are more important than its ultimate condition view this sort of fastidiousness as a peculiar mental disorder and refuse to get involved in such foolishness. I consider that such pickiness is ultimately futile, since after examining forty or fifty copies of the same comic book you lose a good deal of your judgment and are quite liable to select a copy which is not necessarily the best one available. Deciding between two comics which are in nearly equivalent condition takes far too much time to be worthwhile.

I. COMIC BOOK GRADES

There are five basic grades of comic books by condition, and these have been commonly named, in order of increasing collectability, POOR, FAIR, GOOD, FINE, MINT, Each of these grades is divided into several subgrades (which we will describe below), and each actually represents a *range of conditions* into which comic books might fall. The problem of the dealer and collector is to pigeonhole comic books, which show an infinite variation in their conditions, into those five categories. Disagreements arise when two people place the same comic book into two different pigeonholes.

Of the five categories named above, only three—the better three—are listed in the *Comic Book Price Guide* as being conditions which a collector should seek in books for his collection. Comics in POOR and FAIR condition are "fillers" only and should not be purchased except very cheaply and in utter desperation. Comics in poor condition actually should be thrown out rather than remain in circulation, unless they are extremely rare in *any* condition. Dealers sometimes keep a stock of POOR condition books which they can pirate to replace pages which might be missing from books in otherwise collectable condition.

The graph reproduced in figure 1 shows the relative abundance of comic books by condition (the solid line) and the relative price by condition (the dashed line). The lion's share of comic books in circulation fall into the GOOD grade, somewhat fewer fall into the FAIR and FINE grades, somewhat fewer fall into the POOR grades, and fewest of all fall into the MINT grades. The MINT books command the highest prices, the FINE books a good deal less, the GOOD books still less, and the FAIR and POOR books much less than that.

Since grading comic books requires setting up a *scale*, and setting up a scale requires defining two points on that scale on whose value everybody agrees, let me set up this rule of thumb: a MINT comic book is one which is nearly flawless, retains all its original gloss and lustre *regardless of age*, and is for all practical purposes in the same condition in which it first appeared on the newsstand. A

[continued on page 28]

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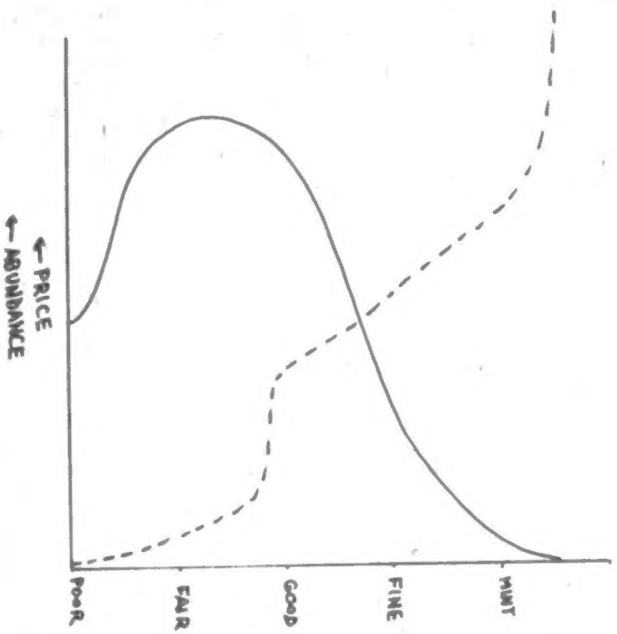
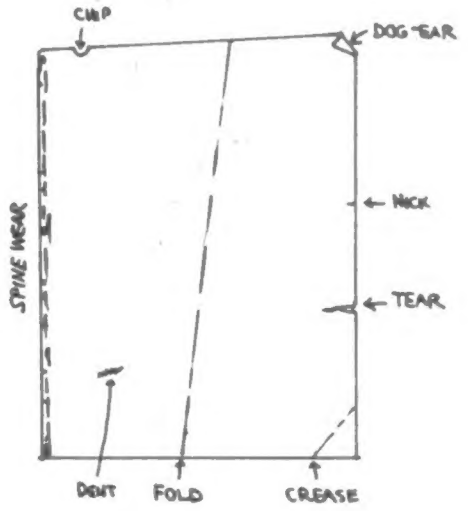


Fig. 1



NORMAL COMIC BOOK WEAR.

Fig. 3

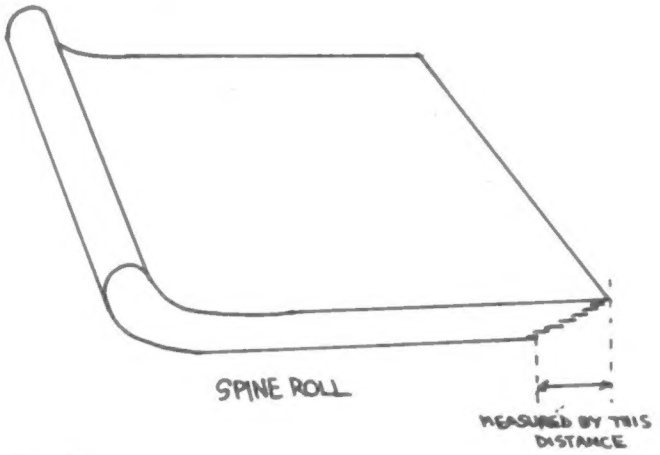


Fig. 2.

GOOD comic book is one which shows definite signs of handling, including creases and nicks (particularly along the spine), but certainly has no noticeable pieces missing from the cover (front or back), has only a minimal amount of tape, is still held together by its staples and does not require abnormal care in reading to keep it from falling apart. We'll make those definitions much more precise below.

A. MINT CONDITION

The term "mint condition" was taken over from stamp collecting, where stamps fall into two very obvious categories, "used" or "cancelled" and "mint" or "uncancelled". Oddly enough, coins, which are "minted", have no "mint" grade; rather, the highest grade in coin collecting is called "proof", denoting a special condition coin purposely struck by a mint on special presses and never directly touched by ungloved hands. The highest grade for coins in common circulation is "proof-like" or "brilliant uncirculated". Since all the other comic book grades were taken over from coin collecting, it is odd that the term "uncirculated" never came into use to describe such comic books, since that is exactly what the term "mint" means. I guess it's just because "mint" is so much more concise.

There are four subgrades which fall into the MINT grade. In increasing order of desirability, these are ABOUT NEAR MINT, NEAR MINT, MINT and PRISTINE MINT. The differences between these grades depend heavily on the presence of almost insignificant flaws, so that ABOUT NEAR MINT and PRISTINE MINT describe books which are quite close in appearance. Nevertheless, a PRISTINE MINT book is one absolutely without any flaws regardless of age, no nicked corners, no signs of wear, no printing or binding defects (for example, staples properly lined up with the spine and cover art cut square with the book's edge), all original gloss and no visible browning of the pages. Since most comics are improperly handled on the way to the newsstand and suffer from dented corners or nicks due to bundling, only a small fraction of newsstand books fall into the PRISTINE MINT category.

As soon as a comic acquires even *one* defect, it falls into the MINT category. Most comics which reach the newsstand are MINT; it takes a badly dented corner or a pretty substantial crease to put a newsstand book down to NEAR MINT or ABOUT NEAR MINT. A book in ABOUT NEAR MINT condition has been read and handled several times and has acquired a fair number of nicks and dents as a result. However, it has lost none of its original gloss, the cover is still bright and—quite important—the back cover of the book is nice and clean. A good rule to remember when trying to decide whether a book is or is not in one of the MINT grades is to examine the back cover. If it is clean and glossy and unmarked by fingerprints and whatnot, then the chances are that the book (unless it has some other defects) is a MINT book. White interior pages are another good landmark.

B. FINE CONDITION

Comics in FINE condition form the bulk of most collections which have been built up by purchasing back issues rather than by purchasing books directly off the stands, reading them once or twice and storing them away. There are again four grades of FINE condition books, ranging in desirability from ABOUT FINE through FINE, ABOUT VERY FINE and VERY FINE. Some collectors go one more step and recognize an EXTREMELY FINE grade, but that might be splitting hairs just a bit *too* much!

FINE condition comics show definite signs of having been read. The spine, which in the MINT grades only suffers occasional nicks, shows a fairly uniform but light wear along most or all of its length. There may be one or two small pieces ("chips") missing from the edges of the cover, and a small quantity of magic tape is tolerable in the ABOUT FINE and FINE subgrades. In spite of all these defects, the cover itself is still largely clean, crisp and bright, the staples are tight, and the interior pages, while not "blindingly white", certainly should not show heavy browning or discoloration. Most of the cover gloss should still be present, but it will most likely be subdued because of the increased amount of exposure to the elements that the book has received.

Thus, VERY FINE books show the above wear to a minimal degree but enough to disqualify them from any of the MINT grades; ABOUT VERY FINE books show more wear; FINE books show still more; and ABOUT FINE books show the most wear of all within the FINE grades. Marvel comics of the early 1960's, as an example, frequently show signs of crumbling along the right edge even when the remainder of the book still looks MINT. Depending on the amount of crumble, such copies fall squarely into one of the FINE grades. The key characteristic is that while the book definitely shows wear, this wear never seriously interferes with the book's original appearance and feel.

C. GOOD CONDITION

No grade of comic books is more abused than GOOD. Dealers, who hate to grade any book in their stock below GOOD condition, will place the most uncollectable garbage into this grade in the hopes of luring some unwitting customer into buying those books so they can return at least some of their original investment. Until standards for GOOD condition books undergo a thorough revision, collectors should avoid buying GOOD condition comics unless they have the opportunity to examine them first.

I have seen comics with *layers* of tape, large pieces missing from their covers, limp and broken spines, extensive water damage, considerable brittleness, cellophane tape staining, food staining, split spines and detached covers, missing pages, removed coupons and interior panels, prominent tears, solar discoloration and spines severely damaged through removal from hardcover permanent binding, all offered for sale—many sold—in GOOD condition. Collectors should not delude themselves into thinking that such items are in GOOD condition; they are *not*.

First and foremost, a comic book in GOOD condition is just that: in *good* condition. It is not an eyesore, has no major defects which detract from its appearance and requires no special handling or delicate treatment in reading. Tape may be present (magic tape only) as long as it is unobtrusive and does not interfere with the artwork. Light water stains may exist, again only if they do not obtrude on the art. Above all, any book in GOOD condition should be acceptable to any comic collector, at least until a copy in FINE or MINT condition comes along.

Following the pattern we have established for the FINE condition subgrades, the GOOD condition subgrades are (in decreasing order of desirability) VERY GOOD, ABOUT VERY GOOD, GOOD and ABOUT GOOD. By the time a comic has worn to the point of being ABOUT GOOD, it is only marginally acceptable as a collector's item.

D. FAIR CONDITION

As long as a comic has no missing pages and no large chunks of artwork torn out or removed, it may be graded in FAIR condition. Brittle books which require cautious turning of the pages into order to be read and not fall apart are usually in FAIR condition. Since books in FAIR condition are not generally purchased or dealt with by collectors, there is no need to provide more than two subgrades: FAIR and ABOUT FAIR.

E. POOR CONDITION

Comic books with missing pages or art, coverless or with cover logos removed, severe brittleness, severe staining by cellophane tape, heavy water damage and so forth, are POOR condition books and should be universally rejected by collectors. Again, only two subgrades need be recognized: POOR and VERY POOR. I will leave it to the reader's imagination to come up with a set of characteristics which might be typical of a VERY POOR condition comic!

II. THE SYSTEM

Now that we have discussed some of the criteria which can be used to determine the grade of a comic by "rule of thumb", let me introduce a concept which I use time and time again to grade books which I buy and which never seems to let me down in either precision or accuracy. Whenever I get into an argument with a dealer over grading, I introduce him to my system. Because the system largely removes the fuzziness surrounding most collectors' impres-

sions of comic book grading and places the whole scheme on a precise footing, the dealer usually comes around and grades his comics my way. (The fact that I refuse to deal with him if he doesn't might color his judgment somewhat, however.)

The concept is this: Imagine that the book you hold in front of you, whose grade you wish to determine, is in PRISTINE MINT condition. For every flaw and defect, subtract something from the book's PRISTINE MINT rating until you have taken into account everything you can see that is wrong with the book. The final grade at which the book comes to rest is then its proper grade. Simple and effective, once this system becomes part of the collector's arsenal and he becomes accustomed to its use, he will quickly learn to estimate a book's condition without actually carrying out the entire operation.

To put some kind of precision into the system, it is necessary to rate all the possible flaws which comic books can acquire according to some uniform, preferably numeric, scale. Then, if we start with a score of 100 for a PRISTINE MINT comic and subtract the value of each flaw in turn from this score, until all the book's flaws have been taken into account, we will eventually be left with a number which measures the comic's real grade.

If we arbitrarily designate a score of zero as the lowest acceptable grade of comic (that is, the bottom of the ABOUT GOOD subgrade), we can give numerical ranges to the other collectable grades in between zero and 100, as follows:

PRISTINE MINT: 100
MINT: 95-99
NEAR MINT: 90-94
ABOUT NEAR MINT: 80-89
VERY FINE: 70-79
ABOUT VERY FINE: 60-69
FINE: 50-59
ABOUT FINE: 40-49
VERY GOOD: 30-39
ABOUT VERY GOOD: 20-29
GOOD: 10-19
ABOUT GOOD: 0-9
FAIR: below 0
POOR: well below 0

III. RATING COMIC BOOK FLAWS

The most straightforward way to rate a particular flaw on the above numerical scale is to imagine a PRISTINE MINT comic with *just that one flaw in it*, and then ask into which category the book should fall. For example, a PRISTINE MINT comic with one nick in its cover would still be a MINT book, since the nick could very well have been acquired on the newsstand. Thus a single nick would rate one point, and the comic would have a score of 99. If the book had two nicks, it would rate 98; three nicks, 97; and 21 nicks would rate the book at 79. This seems to make sense, since no book with more than twenty nicks in it should be considered even ABOUT NEAR MINT!

A. PRINTING DEFECTS

Printing defects are those flaws with which a comic book is born. These include misalignment of the left edge of the cover art with the spine of the book, misalignment of the free edges of the cover with the cover art (that is, cover not centered), staples not aligned with the spine of the book, and off-register printing, both internal and on the cover. Unless they are very severe, none of these printing defects should be worth more than one point. If a noticeable and distracting amount of the back cover appears on the front at the spine, this should count five points.

Books with grotesque and bizarre printing defects, such as stapling at the right edge of the book rather than the spine, no staples, interior pages out of order, colors missing or interchanged on the cover or in the interior, double and triple covers, extra pages, and so forth, are themselves collectable as curiosities. We are only concerned with normal comic books in this article, however, so that the term "printing defect" really applies only to those slight deviations from perfection indicated above.

B. STANDARD DEFECTS OF WEAR

Once a comic book enters circulation, unless it is handled very carefully it acquires a unique set of nicks, dents, scratches, creases, wrinkles, dog-ears, smudges, fingermarks, water stains, folds and tears. These are usually evident along the edges of the cover, which takes the brunt of the beating and which is where most of the wear and tear of the book is concentrated.

Repeated opening and closing of a cover will generate wear at the spine, which first shows up as a thin white line along the spine fold and gradually expands out into the art of the front and back covers. Comics which have been carelessly stacked in a vertical pile may develop *spine roll* (see figure 2), where an amount of the back cover migrates, together with staples, onto the front of the book. Reading a comic book with the front cover folded over to the back greatly increases the strain on the spine and results in a system of parallel creases and nicks near the spine in addition to normal spine wear.

If a drop or two of water comes in contact with a comic book cover, it almost immediately soaks into the paper and causes the book to pucker at that location. In addition, if the water is "hard" it may cause some of the ink to bleed towards the edge of the wetted area and give rise to a typical water stain. If the water contacts the staples of the book, it may cause them to rust. Water damage by direct wetting is rare in comic books which have been stored away in attics and such; what happens far more frequently is water damage through excessive humidity. Such "humidified" books generally exhibit rusted staples, covers which feel rough to the touch and pages which are stiff, wrinkled and even mildewy.

Comic books which are left exposed to the elements can suffer soilage, fading and browning of the pages. Collectors who wish to preserve their books' value and appearance generally store their books individually in plastic (polyethylene) bags. Such storage prevents the accumulation of finger marks and dirt and keeps the comic from exposure to air, which is usually quite acid in urban areas. Every comic book is printed on the worst, most acid paper available. Heat, light and exposure to air accelerate the chemical deterioration of the paper, and books which show signs of this kind of chemical deterioration should not be considered as being in MINT condition. (Editor's Note: We will be running an article in a future issue of *Collector's Dream* on Vapor Phase Deacidification of comic books, which is said to increase their longevity and durability.)

When comic books are distributed to newsstands, the newsdealer frequently stamps the date he receives the comics on the books themselves. This allows him to return unsold copies to his distributor at the proper time. Since collectors often have no control over the placement or prominence of the date of receipt, the presence of a date of receipt should never by itself downgrade a book below MINT. Books without such dates of receipt are, however, just slightly preferable to stamped books.

A more serious defect inflicted on comic books by the distributor involves spraying the edges of a week's shipment of comics with colored paint to save the newsdealer the trouble of dating them. Each week's shipment receives a different color, and the newsdealer is told which colored books are to be returned that week. Comics with such painted edges can *never* be considered to be in MINT condition, and collectors should avoid buying their newsstand comics from such newsdealers.

Here, then, is a catalogue of the standard defects of wear which comic books may acquire during their existence in collections and accumulations, together with their point ratings as determined by the criterion outlined in the introductory paragraph to this section.

ONE POINT DEFECTS:

Light nicks insignificant (less than 1 / 8 inch long) tears, short (less than 1 / 4 inch long) creases, simple dents, very light and short white spine lines, slight wrinkling. Date of receipt stamped on back cover. Take one point off for each occurrence.

TWO POINT DEFECTS:

Light water stains (less than 1 / 4 square inch), finger marks, white spine line along entire length of spine but no other spine wear, wear near staples, short tears (1 / 8-1 / 4 inch long), wrinkling in a localized area, moderate creases (1 / 4-1 inch long), small chips out of edge (less than 1 / 4 inch long). Date of receipt stamped on front cover. Take two points off for each occurrence.

FIVE POINT DEFECTS:

Larger water stains (between 1 / 4 and one square inch), discoloration around the edges of the cover and / or interior pages, uniform but light spine wear (take off five points *per inch*), slight tearing away of the cover at the staples, prominent creases (take off five points *per inch*), prominent tears (take off five points *per quarter inch*), soilage (take off five points *per square inch*), prominent wrinkling (take off five points *per square inch*), distractingly prominent chips out of the edge of the cover, date of receipt written on either front or back cover, spine roll (take off five points for every 1 / 16 of an inch).

Taken individually, the above defects of normal wear are pretty minor. It is when they accumulate in quantity that they begin to take their toll of condition. Figure 3 illustrates a comic cover showing most of the different kinds of ordinary, normal defects of wear a comic can accumulate in the course of its collectable lifetime.

C. NON-STANDARD DEFECTS

Most comic books get heavily downgraded because of non-standard defects, which are mainly due to careless handling, ignorance of proper repair techniques and abuse. Such defects should always be reported if they are present in comics advertised for sale. A comic book exhibiting any of these defects can practically never be considered to be in any of the MINT grades; thus each defect is worth a hefty twenty points right off the bat. Some of the non-standard defects are so disastrous as to render a book totally unfit for collecting.

The most frequent non-standard defects include repairs by magic tape and cellophane tape, chunks torn off either front or back cover, missing pages, missing story panels, missing coupons from advertisements, writing on a cover exclusive of dates of receipt, severe spine damage, severe fading, lack of even a trace of cover gloss, detached cover, brittleness of any kind, food stains, holes punched through the book, and burns.

It is possible by dint of delicate repair work with white glue (for example), applied sparingly, to repair large tears and replace pieces torn off covers. Comics in which repair work has been skillfully performed can be upgraded, but never into any of the MINT grades unless the comic was qualified as a MINT comic to begin with (for example, a light touch-up on a small discolored area which is the only defect in the book). Thus even the best repair work cannot bring a non-standard defect below twenty points in value.

I cannot even begin to list *every* kind of non-standard defect which a comic book can acquire, so I'm just going to list a representative sample which the reader will frequently encounter throughout his collecting days.

TAPE: take off 20 points if it exists at all, and 20 more points for each square inch over the first square inch; *double* these amounts if the tape is *cellophane* rather than magic tape; *double* these amounts also for masking tape, electrical tape, and so forth. Consider *each piece* individually.

CHUNKS MISSING: take off 20 points for every chunk over a square inch in area regardless of its location in the book; take off 20 points for *any size* chunk which takes with it a piece of art; multiply by one and one half if the chunks are missing from the front cover; take off 20 extra points if the chunk takes with it an important piece of the cover (for example, Captain America's face); take off 20 points for *each additional* square inch in missing area. Since missing pages and removed coupons are extreme cases of missing chunks, they may be rated accordingly.

WATER DAMAGE: Water stains over one square inch in area are worth 20 points for every square inch. Take off 10 points for each rusted staple, 20 points if heavily rusted. Take off 30 points if a book shows extensive evidence of having been stored in a moist environment, such as rough or wrinkled pages, stiff cover, and so forth.

WRITING: take off 20 points for *any* distracting or obvious writing in ink; take off 40 points for any such writing in magic marker; take off 20 points for every square inch over one square inch covered with writing; but deduct only one quarter as many points if the writing is in pencil and light (a book can still be in NEAR MINT condition with light pencil marks on it.).

MISSING COVER GLOSS: not a very serious defect—take off ten points if not a shred of cover gloss remains, and proportionately less if some still exists.

BRITTLENESS: take off 100 points if the book is beginning to shed chips from the interior pages. It is difficult to tell if a book is actually turning brittle unless it already *has*, but take off 50 points if a book even looks *suspicious*. There is *nothing* which can be done to save a book from brittleness once the disease has set in:

FOOD STAINS: take off 20 points for every square inch or fraction thereof which is marred by staining of any sort, whether it be food stains, ink stains, mildew, grease marks, etc. Take off 20 points for edge-painting.

HOLES PUNCHED THROUGH BOOK: Some comics during the Golden Age were displayed for sale by being nailed to a storekeeper's wall. Take off 20 points for each hole, 40 points for holes which are larger than those made by nails. Take off 75 points for holes *burned* through a cover or an interior page.

DISCOLORATION AND FADING: take off 20 points for every square inch over ¼ square inch of faded or discolored area.

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This finishes our survey of comic book grading and our description of a precise grading system. I believe that this system works and works well, and provides a reasonably objective way of arriving at a uniform grade for a comic book with which no dealer could disagree. I would urge collectors who wish to adopt this system to practice on a few books until they get the knack of estimating a comic's grade without actually having to count the points themselves, which can be a very time-consuming process.

If you find a comic book with a defect which was not mentioned above, rely on your own judgment in giving it a rating. As I outlined in the introduction to Section III, think of the book as being in PRISTINE MINT condition with *only that defect alone*, and answer the question, "What condition is this book in?"

And don't be surprised if the comics in your collection come out at lower grades than you thought.

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